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ABSTRACT

A guide to learning strategies for English as a second language (ESL) college students outlines a variety of classroom and study skills, information about American academic practices, and common cultural misconceptions. Sections are included on listening with comprehension, understanding lecture format and style, taking lecture notes, speaking for communication, participating in class discussions, giving a prepared talk and feeling at ease, use of different kinds of dictionaries, using the library resources and services, the role of critical thinking in college education, and taking various types of examinations. The guide includes brief descriptions of typical situations in which ESL students might find themselves. (MSE)

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HOW TO SUCCEED IN YOUR COLLEGE COURSES: A GUIDE FOR THE ESL STUDENT

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This booklet is one in a series of AAP STUDENT SERVICE articles developed for the college textbook publishers to help students improve their use of study time and learning materials. Titles of the other booklets can be found on the back cover.

Studying is an essential aspect of education – representing a large investment in time and money. Like driving, athletics or any other activity, it requires practice and concentration. To study well it is important to know how to make maximum use of the books and facilities that are available. The enjoyment of learning and the retention of knowledge depends in great part on developing good study skills and learning habits.

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Foreword

You have decided to attend a college or university in the United States, a big decision in your life! If you are a student who has learned English as a second language, this may be the first time you are studying subjects in a language which isn't your native tongue. Perhaps you have used textbooks written in English in your own country. Perhaps you have already studied some of the subjects you will take here. But while the content of your books and courses may seem familiar, many of our practices in education will not. In fact, people from other countries who study in the United States report that they learn on two different levels: They learn the content of their courses, and they also acquire special skills and strategies for learning that are used in the United States. The purpose of this booklet is to acquaint you with some of these skills and strategies.

You may believe that doing your studies in English requires only the ability to read and write the language fluently. Knowing English well enough to read textbooks and write examinations and papers is certainly the most important requirement for an English-as-a-second-language student in the United States. If you need more work in English, most schools will help you find the right class. Many colleges and universities have special departments that teach English to ESL students. You can also find important suggestions about reading and writing skills by reading the following titles in this series of booklets: *How to improve your reading skills*, *How to get the most out of your textbook*, *How to build your writing skills*, and *How to read technical books*.

Many students discover, however, that studying in the United States requires more than just reading and writing English. They find that they must also listen with comprehension, speak in order to communicate, and deal with ideas in ways which seem both new and strange.

In this booklet you will read about ways of learning that are appropriate in American colleges and universities. By discussing these learning strategies with other students and by using them yourself, you will find in time that they have become a natural part of your way of doing things.

Listening with comprehension

Mohammed enrolled as an engineering student at a large university in the Middle West. He had studied English in his own country for six years and had used textbooks in English at secondary school. He had taken the TOEFL and received a score which excused him from taking English classes at the university. He felt well prepared for college.*

But when the semester began and he started to attend classes, he experienced a shock. His math class didn't give him too much trouble

because the instructor wrote all of the formulas on the blackboard. But in his social science courses he couldn't follow what the professors were saying. It certainly wasn't the same kind of English he had heard in his own country. Moreover, the professors talked so fast that he couldn't begin to write down what they said. He found that he wasn't able to take notes. At the same time, he realized that the lectures often provided information that didn't appear in the textbooks for the course.

Mohammed's story is typical of what many nonnative speakers experience when they first attend lectures in English. Some students aren't accustomed to having the professor lecture on subjects which go beyond the information in the assigned reading. They also aren't accustomed to using the skills of listening comprehension and note taking in order to learn new subjects.

In the following sections are suggestions that will help you understand the spoken English used in college lectures. You will also find suggestions for taking lecture notes that will help you remember what you hear.

*Test of English as a Foreign Language. Educational Testing Service, New Jersey.

Understanding lectures

Understanding a lecture is a challenging task. It requires a number of separate, language-related abilities, as well as some prior background in the topic of the lecture. At first you may feel discouraged, but keep attending class. You will find that you understand more and more each week.

Listen for the overall ideas, or major points. Don't get lost in details such as elaborate illustrations or long digressions. If the professor digresses, or "gets off the track," there will be many clues to tell you that this has happened. The clues may be verbal or given through body language. Some speakers, for example, take off their glasses when they move away from a prepared outline. Others will put the chalk down or move to the other side of the desk or lecture platform.

Listen for the phrases that announce a new topic, signal a change of topic, or summarize what has been said. A great deal of language is made up of these stock phrases. Make a list of the expressions you hear over and over in lectures: "The last time I talked about . . ."; "Today, I want to talk about . . ."; "Now, we'll turn to . . ."; "I will give three examples why . . ."; "My point is that . . ."

Look for the particular characteristics of each lecturer. Professors have their own individual styles of presenting material. As a rule, lecturers in American universities are rather informal. They usually have notes, but don't read from a paper.

Pay close attention to anything that the lecturer writes on the blackboard. Be sure to put it in your notes. If you cannot read what is on the blackboard, ask for an explanation. Also, be sure to pick up any handouts or other materials that are distributed.

Anticipate what the lecturer will say by reading the assigned material before class. This will prepare you to understand the key concepts, words, and phrases. The lectures may not cover the same material that appears in the textbook, but the more background information you have, the better. As you read, make a list of specialized vocabulary related to the subject matter of the course.

Come to class on time and sit close to the front of the room. You should be in your seat, waiting for the lecture, before the professor enters the room. If you come in late, it may take you a while to figure out what the professor is saying. Sitting close to the front of the room will help you concentrate better.

Don't rely on a tape recorder to do your listening for you. It is a useful tool, but one which will interfere with your listening comprehension.

Remember that the rhythm of spoken English tends to be uneven. In some ways it is like the syncopated rhythm of jazz. Each syllable in an English word or sentence has a strong or weak stress. The syllables that aren't stressed tend to be pronounced lightly, resulting in a sound that is sometimes spelled "uh." Speakers rush over unstressed syllables and stretch out stressed syllables. Once you have a sense of the characteristic rhythm of English, it will be easier to understand the spoken language.

Don't feel that you will be unable to understand spoken American English if you have studied only British English. These two varieties of English differ primarily in their vowel sounds. Anyone who knows English can adapt to a slightly different sound system. There are very few words that are different, and these don't appear very often in lectures. Also, the grammatical structures of British and American English are quite alike. Learn to differentiate between the various types of English, including regional varieties of American English. Knowing the differences will help you listen with greater comprehension.

Spend time outside of class with people who speak English. The amount of time it takes you to get accustomed to American English in lectures depends on the amount of exposure you have to the language. If you use the language to talk to friends and participate in college activities, it will take much less time. Watching TV and attending films also give good practice in listening to English.

Taking lecture notes

In many of your courses the class notes are the most important reference you will use to prepare for examinations. The lectures consist of material that the professor has worked on over a long period of time. Often,

they represent the professor's own textbook in preparation.

Keeping a good set of notes is a specialized skill, one that all students, including Americans, must learn. Taking notes is demanding because it involves both listening with comprehension and organizing the material as one writes. Skillful note takers don't write down every word they hear. Instead, they try to make sense out of the material as they put it down. The lecturer may or may not follow a systematic outline. But to make your notes usable, you should take down the information in a modified outline system. Underlining and indenting can help identify the main points.

It is true that for some large undergraduate courses it is possible to buy a set of notes in the campus bookstore. If prepared notes are available, buy them. These purchased notes will not give you a complete record, however, because they don't include the spontaneous remarks made in class.

In most college courses, you will receive an outline or syllabus that gives a list of topics and dates. Make use of it to anticipate the content of the lectures.

Here are some techniques for taking good class notes that are particularly relevant to students who are not native speakers of English:

Take notes in English. You will become more fluent in the language if you use it exclusively for the subjects you are studying in college. Of course, you will never stop using your native language; you will simply use it in other parts of your life.

Use abbreviations and symbols. A number of symbols are standardized, particularly in scientific fields. Learn the abbreviations and acronyms that are frequently used in your own area of study.

Develop a consistent format. Always put the date on the top of the page. Number the pages. Try to write legibly. Use a pen. Keep the notes for each course in one place. Some students find it easier to have a notebook for each course. Use standard-size paper; in the United States it is customarily 8½ x 11 inches. Leave wide margins on the paper, particularly on the left-hand side. After the lecture, you can use this space for writing in questions or comments on the material.

If there is material you feel unclear about, leave enough space on the page so that you can write a clarification at a later time. Perhaps you can do this after talking the subject over with the instructor or a friend from class.

Read over your notes as soon as possible after class. Write in any additional information that you weren't able to put down during the lecture itself. Some students use a different color ink to write in additional comments. That way they know what they added later.

Some students find that rewriting or typing their notes is a good strategy, not only for keeping a well-written set of notes, but also as a method of learning. The process of rewriting provides an automatic review of the lecture. This also should be done as soon after the lecture as possible.

It is better to write a lot than a little. Keep writing. You will be surprised

how much of what you write can later provide associations that help you remember points from the lecture.

Always take notes on questions asked by other students and on discussions that take place. It is often during discussion periods that the most important problems are brought into the open. Also, professors generally remember the discussion sessions and may include this material in examination questions.

Always go to class. The American college system is based on class attendance. Most professors work hard to prepare their lectures and they expect you to attend. The most important material on their subjects may be provided in the lectures rather than in the readings for the course. More important, a good deal of the American educational system relies on the spontaneous, impromptu discussions that arise between students and teachers. If you aren't there, you will miss a great deal.

Write down all announcements regarding class business: dates for quizzes and exams, dates when papers are due, dates for special class meetings, the professor's office hours, etc. Don't rely on your memory. Keep a place in your notebook for these important dates.

Develop a "buddy system" with another person in the class. This may be a way to meet an American student and become friends. Exchange telephone numbers so that if an emergency forces either of you to miss a class, you will both have someone to call to find out if any important announcements were made. In an emergency, too, you can ask to borrow your buddy's notes. But don't expect someone else's notes to be as valuable as those you would have taken yourself if you had been in class!

Speaking in order to communicate

Kenji had completed one semester towards a master's degree in business administration at a university in California. During that time, he had taken courses in statistics and accounting. He had received good grades, although he had never asked a question in class or taken part in a discussion. In those classes, it was possible to remain silent and still be successful. Kenji simply used the explanations in the textbooks to solve the assigned problems.

But during that first semester, Kenji's friend Hiroshi told him about the second-semester courses. These included marketing and economics. In both, along with listening to lectures, the students did problem solving, brainstorming, simulations, and other activities that involved talking in English. Moreover, students had to give oral reports in both courses. Kenji had studied English for many years in Japan, but he had never used English freely in class discussions or in prepared talks.

Kenji's courses in business administration are typical of those in many departments in American colleges. Students must be prepared to take part in discussions, ask questions in class, and give oral reports. Here are some practical suggestions that will prepare you to take part in these activities.

Participating in class discussions

Along with lectures, many courses you take will include class discussions. One student may ask a question, the professor will answer, another student will comment, and so on. Most American professors encourage questions from students. When they ask, "Are there any questions?" they want people to speak up.

In a course with a large enrollment, you probably will have small "study sections" or "quiz sections" in addition to lecture meetings. In the smaller sections, 10-20 students meet with a teaching assistant or teaching fellow. Usually this person is an advanced graduate student in the field. The purpose of the study section is to give students an opportunity to ask questions about anything concerning the content of the course. Never hesitate to use this opportunity.

Discussion groups may also be formed within large classes to encourage students to do independent, analytical, and critical thinking. Students are divided into groups of 4-6 people and are given a specific task to carry out in a given period of time. There may be a few minutes of noisy chair moving, but once the groups are formed, each person concentrates on contributing to the discussion. Talking in front of a small group is usually easier for most students. It also is a way to become acquainted with other people in the class. As a member of a small discussion group, you have certain responsibilities.

Cheerfully take on one of the jobs to be done. Someone is the moderator, or the person who guides the discussion and reports back to the whole group. Someone is the recorder, or the person who takes notes. Someone is the timekeeper, or the person who watches the clock.

Help to keep the discussion moving along by adding a new point or by summarizing what was said previously.

Clearly express your own views, but be ready to modify them to incorporate other people's ideas as well. Small-group discussions are generally not debates in which opposing views are aired. Instead, there should be consensus and negotiation.

Do the required or suggested reading before you come to class whenever a topic or theme is announced in advance. The reading will help you learn new words or phrases that fit the topic.

Listen carefully. Try not to lose the main point of the discussion. Be ready to bring others back to the main topic if they get away from it.

Ask for clarification if someone says something you don't fully understand. The explanation may help others, too.

Watch carefully for the techniques used by American students to gain a turn at speaking. The other students will probably not raise their hands to get permission to speak. Yet, no one interrupts when someone else is talking. Unconsciously, they use body language, eye contact, and verbal strategies.

When you make your comments, refer to what other people in the group have said. This makes people feel good because they know that you have heard and thought about their contributions.

The final suggestion may not apply to you, but you can help others follow it: **Stay on the subject and don't talk too much.**

Giving a prepared talk

Making an oral presentation is an assignment that graduate students carry out routinely. As you take more advanced courses in your major field, you can expect to find that oral reports are frequently required.

Many professions require people to speak before an audience, perhaps not to an auditorium filled with people, but certainly in small meetings to report on the progress of a study or on a research proposal. You will be most successful as an oral presenter if you view the assignment as an opportunity to gain experience talking in front of a group.

This section lists the most important "dos" and "don'ts" of giving a prepared talk.

Don't read from a paper when talking in front of a group of people. This is *not* the custom in the United States. Perhaps the influence of television announcers has affected people in this respect: these speakers look directly at their audience rather than down at notes or a script.

Include fewer main points than you would in a written report. The audience cannot take in information as rapidly when they listen as when they read.

Elaborate more than you would in a written report. Use more illustrations and examples to help the audience understand the main ideas.

Give plenty of clues that tell the audience *before* you say something what you intend to say. Let them know when you are going to change the topic. Say, for example, "Now I'd like to turn to...." A well-known formula for giving a short oral talk is the following: Tell them what you plan to say, say it, and then tell them what they have heard.

Give your oral presentations in a somewhat informal, conversational tone. You should be more formal than you are when speaking on the telephone with friends, but you shouldn't sound as though you have memorized your speech.

Try to involve your audience in the content of your talk. You may be intensely interested in a point of theoretical economics, but you will have to find ways to make your audience share your enthusiasm. You can do it by including remarks that are surprising, or controversial, or that show people there may be personal benefits from the abstract ideas you are presenting. You can also direct questions to the audience as you develop your main points.

Forget about perfect grammar. Instead, just talk. In an oral presentation it is quite acceptable to use phrases that aren't complete sentences.

Try to speak from an outline on 3 x 5 cards. You may not be ready to do this right away, but you can work toward this goal. If you need the security of writing out your entire talk, prepare it in conversational style rather than as a written report. In doing so, you will practice your presentation to such an extent that you may need only to glance at your paper occasionally.

Pay attention to the clock. Otherwise you may have to end too quickly when the moderator or timekeeper tells you that your time is up. To estimate the length of your speech, remember that it takes about 5-8 minutes to say 525 words, roughly the equivalent of two double-spaced, typewritten pages.

Pay attention to your body language. Whether you remain seated at a table or stand in front of the class, your gestures and body movements contribute to the overall effect of your talk. Try not to have an object such as paper clip or a piece of chalk in your hand. It is hard not to fumble with it, causing audience distraction. Try to relax, but don't slouch. Just be comfortable.

Look directly at various individuals in your audience. Eye contact is probably the most important element of body language for an oral presentation. A helpful technique is to spot quickly those people who appear receptive – the smiling faces – and talk directly to them. Try not to look at those who seem bored or quizzical.

It may help to use a podium, or lecture stand, if there is one in the room. You should try it out before the day of your talk, however; if you find it uncomfortable, don't use it.

If you speak for more than 5-10 minutes, illustrate your talk by using the blackboard or by distributing a photocopied handout. If you use the blackboard, write out most of your material before you start to speak, even before class begins if possible. Write legibly, or don't write at all. And don't put too much on the blackboard. If you prepare a handout, type it. Design the handout so that it doesn't give all the information contained in your talk. If you put too much on the handout, your audience may never look at you. They will be too busy reading.

Always practice your talk before you present it. If you cannot find a friend or family member to listen to you, then use a full-length mirror. You may want to tape-record your talk so that you can listen to it critically. You may also want to ask an American student to listen to it and correct your pronunciation at any point where it is difficult to understand. Another reason to practice is to time your talk. You may find that you have to cut or add material to fit the time requirement.

After you have practiced your speech and prepared the handouts or other aids, relax and concentrate on communicating your message to the audience. If you can get your audience to enjoy your talk, you will enjoy it, too.

Tools for learning

Maria and Carlos had been friends in secondary school in Mexico. Now they were both computer science majors at a large university in New York City. Maria, who had always enjoyed teasing Carlos, met him one day at the bus stop.

"Why are you carrying that old Spanish-English dictionary, Carlos?" she asked in English. "Do you want to be mistaken for a tourist just off the plane?"

Carlos knew that Maria's English was better than his, but he wasn't going to let her put him down. He answered Maria using English, too.

"I don't care what people think," he said. "I use it to find new English words I hear every day. Here, take a look and see how many I have underlined."

"Carlos, you'll never learn English that way. A Spanish-English dictionary isn't going to help you much at all."

Maria wasn't kind when she criticized Carlos for relying on a Spanish-English dictionary, but she was right. Bilingual dictionaries provide a very limited amount of information. If you, like Carlos, need the security of a Thai-English, German-English, Greek-English, Farsi-English, Korean-English, Hebrew-English, or other bilingual dictionary, then you should read the following about using a dictionary.

This section also presents information on another tool for learning, the college library. Although dictionaries and libraries are different in their physical size, they are fundamentally the same. They both provide systematic methods for storing information. An essential task for all college students is to learn to use these and other reference tools as efficiently and easily as possible.

Using a dictionary

One advantage of Carlos' Spanish-English dictionary is that it is probably small enough to put into his pocket. But there are good reasons why bilingual dictionaries are *not* efficient tools for learning.

- Many are published in non-English-speaking countries where there are few resources for producing reliable dictionaries in foreign languages.
- They falsely give the idea that there is a one-to-one correspondence between words in two languages. This may cause misunderstandings about the meaning of English words.
- They give a limited number of meanings for each entry, with little information about the various contexts in which a word may be used.
- They limit your progress in English because they make it necessary for you to translate back into your first language, an ineffective language-learning strategy for intermediate and advanced learners.

Although the best dictionary is the largest one you can find, walking around with a fifteen-pound dictionary doesn't make sense. There are paperback, all-English dictionaries, however, which are a convenient size. Your campus bookstore should be able to recommend some. After you buy a dictionary, spend time getting to know it. Read the introductory sections which appear before the definitions. Here, you will find a listing of the symbols used, which should be referred to frequently until you know the dictionary well.

Using the library

A university library is made up of many systems operating within a complex organization. Although the library may at first appear to be a confusing place, if you learn some of the systems, you can make the library work for you. This is important, because you will need to rely on it as a source of materials in many of your courses.

There is a great deal to learn in order to use a large university library. You can begin by locating the following basic resources:

1. The **card catalog** contains cards which list all the books in the library. Arranged alphabetically, each card gives information about the book. Most books are represented in the card catalog by at least three cards: one lists the book under the last name of the author, one under the title of the book, and one under the subject of the book. Sometimes there is more than one subject card. To use the library successfully, you must be able to read and understand the information contained on the card. The most important information on the card is the **call number,** usually listed at the top. You must write down this number accurately in order to locate the book.

2. The **stacks** of the library are the areas where the books are kept. In an open-stack system you can look for the book yourself, using its call number. In a closed-stack system, you must give the call number to a library assistant and then wait while someone locates the book for you.

3. The **indexes** list articles in specialized and professional journals. There are many such indexes. You should begin by getting to know the one which lists popular magazine articles: *The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* lists by author, title, and subject all the articles printed in nearly 160 magazines of interest to the general public. Some of the specialized indexes include the *International Index, Social Science and Humanities Index, Education Index, Engineering Index, Art Index, Applied Science and Technology Index,* and *Industrial Arts Index.* You should become acquainted early on with the specialized indexes relating to your major field.

4. **Periodicals** (newspapers, magazines, and journals) are sometimes kept in special reading rooms on open shelves where they can be used in the library but not checked out.

5. **Microforms** are collections of older books, newspapers, and magazines which are recorded on film because the library doesn't have room to store the original document. The card catalog will tell you if the reference you want is on microform, usually with the abbreviations *mic, mf, mc* or *mfc*. You can read microform material in machines that enlarge the photographed images. Ask the librarian or an assistant to show you how to use the machine.

6. The **reserve book room** contains books, journals and other references that professors have asked the library to keep for their students' use. The library limits the amount of time each borrower can take the material. There are often large fines if you don t return the book on time.

7. The **circulation desk** is the place where you can find out how to check out a book and how long you can keep it. Most libraries today use computers to aid in the circulation process. If you keep books beyond the specified due date, you may receive a computer printout informing you of fines that must be paid.

Most universities provide tours of the library; often these are conducted with the needs of international students in mind. Along with a tour, read any printed material which describes how the library works and where collections are kept. Never feel shy about asking a librarian for assistance. They are trained to help you. The university library is a rich resource which you must use in order to understand how it works.

Learning to evaluate and be evaluated

Mai was upset. As a first-semester graduate student in public health, she had attended all her classes, taken good notes, done all the reading, and studied hard. After her first exam in nutrition she left the classroom feeling confident about what she had written. She was sure she would get a good grade.

But when the professor returned their exams, Mai's grade was only a C + ! What had she done wrong? She searched the paper for a clue. Next to her last answer was this note from her professor: "You know the facts, but I asked you to evaluate the program. Next time let me see some critical thinking along with the statistics."

Mai's experience points out an important characteristic of American higher education. Along with learning facts and acquiring information, in many courses there is an emphasis on **evaluating facts** and **interpreting** information. Merely memorizing the content of the textbook or the lectures is not enough. As a college student, you will be expected to draw on the content to formulate inferences and give opinions.

Critical thinking – the key to success

Perhaps, like Mai, you are unclear about the meaning of critical thinking. Briefly, it means "doing your own thinking." You are thinking critically when you see an advertisement on television and say to yourself: "What is the advertiser's hidden message? How are they trying to influence me?" You are thinking critically when you read about a controversial topic in two different sources with opposing views, and say to yourself: "What are the most important arguments for and against? Which statements are facts, and which are opinions, exaggerations, or even misinformation?" Then, using both sources and your own knowledge and experience, you come to your own conclusion.

When Mai came to understand what the professors expected of her, she began to receive better grades on her written assignments and examinations. She learned to watch for words like *criticize, evaluate,* and *justify.* When she saw any of these words in an assignment, she knew that her professor expected a response that went beyond simply restating the information in the textbook.

As time went on, Mai realized that in most of her courses the crucial skill was critical thinking. This meant, for example, that she had to be able to write papers in which she organized and synthesized complex data. She had to be able to read an article and draw her own conclusions based on it. In time, she discovered that doing her own thinking brought her success and personal satisfaction in her academic work.

Taking examinations

Being evaluated through examinations is a fact of life for students throughout the world. You will be better prepared for any test if you understand what you are expected to do. In some test-taking situations, the best preparation is to get a good night's sleep and arrive feeling relaxed. Placement tests, for example, are designed to find out about your general level of competence. You cannot "cram" for them the day before. But if you feel wide awake, you will be more attentive to the test instructions; most students who perform poorly on tests to do because they didn't follow the directions.

You probably have already taken a standardized test and may be preparing to take others. The TOEFL, for example, a standardized test of English language proficiency, is given both in the United States and abroad. Other standardized tests such as the GRE *(Graduate Record Examination)* and GMAT *(Graduate Management Admissions Test)* are taken by people applying to graduate and professional programs in the United States. High school students seeking entry to college in the U.S. take the SAT *(Scholastic Aptitude Test).*

In standardized tests, test takers fill in an answer sheet and test scorers mark the papers with an answer key. This is called mechanical scoring, since no personal factors about the test takers are considered. There are books for helping yourself prepare for a standardized test. Your campus bookstore will be able to help you locate one that fits your particular needs.

Another type of standardized test, a diagnostic or placement exam, is used before students begin studying. At many universities, students who aren't native speakers of English must take a placement test to determine their English language proficiency. Such tests include writing a composition. Since writing cannot be scored mechanically, grading is done subjectively, but on predetermined, established criteria.

Achievement tests, on the other hand, do require preparation. Your course grade frequently will be determined entirely by your scores on quizzes (brief, sometimes unannounced tests), and midterm, and final exams. Midterms, at some colleges, can take place any time during the semester, while finals always come at the end of the course, usually during a week set aside as an official examination period.

There are three basic types of achievement tests: subjective, objective, and quantitative. **Subjective** exams require a written answer in the form of a brief essay or composition. **Objective** exams consist of giving short answers, filling in blanks, marking items true or false, and selecting one item in multiple-choice sets. Objective questions require quite specific knowledge about the subject. **Quantitative** exams present problems to be solved, usually mathematical.

In writing a subjective, or essay exam, the most important test-taking strategy is to read the question carefully, paying particular attention to the instructions. There is always a key word which states the kind of answer you are expected to write. Successful students circle this word and keep it in focus as they write. You are probably familiar with the following words used in subjective exams; if not, check your dictionary: *define, discuss, describe, compare, contrast, relate, trace, enumerate, list, outline, summarize, criticize, evaluate,* and *justify.*

The last three – *criticize, evaluate,* and *justify* – place special emphasis on critical thinking since they require you to look at both sides of an issue, give "for" and "against" arguments, and then draw a conclusion based on the evidence. When you see any of these three words in an essay exam, you know that your professor expects an answer that goes beyond simply restating the facts from the textbook.

Fraida Dubin, associate professor of English as a second language at the University of Southern California, is coauthor of ESL/EFL texts for students – READING BY ALL MEANS, IT'S TIME TO TALK, and THREE EASY PIECES – as well as for teachers – FACILITATING LANGUAGE LEARNING.

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